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Subject: EPA drills deeper in Dimock

EPA drills deeper in Dimock

By Talia Buford

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EPA's announcement Thursday that it plans to sample the water in 60 homes in Dimock, Pa., could signal further contamination of water sources than first believed, and add to questions about how the government agencies have handled the issue.

The announcement comes just over a month after the EPA declared the town's water safe following natural gas contamination in 2009, and a few weeks after the agency began a door-to-door survey of local residents.

The agency collected data from eight wells in the area and found other hazardous substances and pollutants such as glycols and barium. In a memo released Thursday, the EPA noted that excessive levels of sodium, manganese, arsenic were found in four homes, including one where two small children live. EPA will provide water to those residents.

"EPA is working diligently to understand the situation in Dimock and address residents' concerns," said EPA Region 3 Administrator Shawn Garvin in a statement. "We believe that the information provided to us by the residents deserves further review, and conducting our own sampling will help us fill information gaps."

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection said that it agrees more sampling should be done, and that it will work with EPA to conduct the testing, though it tamped down any alarm surrounding the further testing.

"Our review, so far, tells us that EPA does not seem to have presented any new data here," said Katy Gresh, spokeswoman for DEP, noting that the agency addressed this issue already and set aside money to install a water treatment system for residents, which would address the areas of contamination EPA referenced.

Residents in Dimock had been receiving shipments of drinking water since early 2009, when an explosion at a Cabot Oil and Gas drilling site was believed to contaminate local wells with natural gas. Last month, those shipments stopped when EPA declared that the water was safe to drink. The Sierra Club and other environmental groups pitched in to pick up the bill to supply water to those residents in the interim.

EPA plans to spend \$100,000 to pay for mitigation efforts at the four homes and to finance further testing of the water sources in the affected areas. The testing will begin within a few days, and will take three weeks to complete. Results would be available five weeks after the samples are collected, the agency said.

Chris Tucker, spokesman for the industry campaign Energy in Depth, said the Dimock saga is more about politics than public safety.

"If this thing weren't about politics, EPA would declare its intention to provide drinking water to the tens of thousands of Pennsylvania residents who actually do have legitimate issues with their well water — issues that have nothing to do with oil and natural gas development," Tucker said. "It's interesting that the only compounds of concern identified by EPA today are sodium and manganese, things for which no federal contaminant standard even exists."

Many of the substances noted at concerning levels by EPA, including arsenic, barium and manganese, are naturally occurring substances, but can also be found in drilling fluids. Other substances found in the Dimock water, such as DEHP, is a manufactured chemical used in plastic construction and are also associated with drilling activities.

“If it is true that chemicals used in fracking are showing up in the water wells in Dimock, if that’s accurate, that is an important finding nationwide,” said Jeff Schmidt, director of the Pennsylvania chapter of the Sierra Club. “The industry continues to claim that fracking never resulted in contamination of drinking water wells in the U.S. This may eliminate their ability to make that claim.” If those findings are accurate, it would also place under scrutiny the DEP, which has not acknowledged any other contaminants present in local drinking water. Recently, DEP Secretary Michael Krancer sent a prickly letter to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, calling EPA’s understanding of the situation in Dimock “rudimentary,” and offered to help bring the agency “up to speed on both the technical data and the enforcement history.”

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